

Easter 5, 2011  
Twente, Arnhem

Acts 7:55-60  
1 Peter 2:2-10  
John 14:1-14

### The Way Home

Last Sunday, there was an obvious link between the Bible readings: they each had something to do with sheep and shepherds, pointing to Jesus as the Good Shepherd, on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, 'Good Shepherd Sunday.' What might be the link this week? What is our theme and why?

1. The martyrdom of St Stephen, the first Christian to die for the belief that Jesus was the Messiah.
2. The first letter of St Peter, a letter of encouragement to Christians suffering for their faith, and this famous passage with its high theology of the people of God: '2:<sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.'
3. Finally, Jesus' words of assurance to his disciples in John's Gospel: 14: <sup>1</sup>'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?... <sup>6b</sup>I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'

One writer, Jane Williams, has proposed that 'all three readings suggest at the very least that this world is not our home.' Each shows hope in something that lies beyond this world, yet is not unrelated to it. Each points to the heavenly home, but all attest to how seeing the light of where we are going helps us to shine even in dark circumstances.

Stephen, as he is offering his life, dying for his faith, is granted a vision of Christ from heaven. It reminds him where he is going and also how he is to be as a citizen of heaven

here on earth. This vision of Christ strengthens him in the face of persecution and death, and helps remind us again that we too can lift our sights above the trials and disappointments of this world, knowing that heaven awaits.

7:<sup>55</sup> Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' <sup>57</sup>But they [his attackers] covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' <sup>60</sup>Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.'

Stephen's faith gave him the grace to face his ordeal. It also gave him the grace to forgive. And so Stephen witnesses – and that is all that martyr means in Greek is 'witness' – Stephen witnesses to the way that a citizen of heaven brings those values to earth, even and especially when the ways of the world seem so far from heaven.

Christians who know that heaven is our true home, are often emboldened to try to make our earthly ways match the heavenly ideals better.

RC Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was assassinated while he was celebrating Mass on 24 March 1980. He had annoyed some powerful people by speaking out against abuse of human rights, murder and torture in the country, and the poor flocked to him. Romero once said: 'A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word that doesn't touch the real sin of society in which it is being proclaimed – what sort of gospel is that?' It wouldn't

be good news of the Kingdom; it would be old news of the world.

Anglican Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda openly criticized arbitrary killings and unexplained disappearances under President Idi Amin in the 1970s. So he was murdered in Feb 1977. But his witness for more heavenly standards of justice, like Romero's, made a deep impression on earth.

Martyrs witness with their lives and words to the values of our heavenly home. And they do so on earth. Martyrs see the difference between heaven and earth as regrettable, and know that the Gospel, the Good News, is intended to encourage us as well as point out where earthly ways and values fall short of heavenly ones.

We do not have to die to be a martyr, to be a witness. But we do indeed have to lay down our lives for Christ and for others, to live as citizens of heaven on earth.

St Peter describes this alternative life-style well, all the while recognizing that it is neither easy to live a heavenly life on earth nor is it straightforward to live together with others who also share heavenly ideals. The Christian life is not meant to be easy; it is meant to be good. So there will be times of celebration, but also times of friction and challenge.

Still, Peter says: <sup>4</sup> 'Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and <sup>5</sup> like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.'

Living stones built into, onto Christ. Have you ever looked at a dry stone wall in the English country-side or elsewhere? Each stone is an individual piece, yet they all fit together. They are chosen to fit together, leaning on each other and also supporting each other. Each stone is indispensable, yet no stone, on its own is adequate, complete.

So it is with the living stones of the Church of Christ: together and in Christ, we are made better.

Sometimes relating to each other and connecting is hard work. Sometimes it is not straightforward. But I believe that if we are all built together and into Christ, we are on the way home. The church can be seen, in its ideal of course, as a halfway house towards heaven. At its best, the church is a place that prepares us, excites us, about our heavenly home and helps us live in the here and now for the sake of heaven

Our Scripture readings show us that our home is not here. But they each commit us to making this world more heavenly. And Christ brings it all together. Last week we saw that he was the Good Shepherd leading us out to green pastures. But He is also the Gate. Today he affirms that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is our way home. Amen.